

Big River site for state police rebuked

Opponents say a better site would be at the corner of Howard Avenue and Route 2 in Cranston.

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BY DANIEL BARBARISI, Providence Journal Staff Writer

CRANSTON -- Standing on the pitch 'n putt golf course that the state had once envisioned as the site of its planned state police headquarters, Cranston Mayor Stephen P. Laffey and a group of environmentalists yesterday railed against the governor's plan to use the Big River Reservoir area as the new site for the facility.

"This proposal about the Big River Reservoir has to be dead on arrival," Laffey said. "This plan is an environmental time bomb."

The 18-acre parcel is part of the Big River Reservoir holdings designated only for drinking water and open-space uses. The land, southwest of Exit 7 from Route 95, was condemned from its private owners in 1966 for a new reservoir. The reservoir was never built, but some predict it will be needed. In the early 1990s, the General Assembly passed legislation stipulating that the land "should not be developed in any way."

If the reservoir is used, Laffey and others said, it would set a dangerous precedent that open-space land can be used for governmental purposes. Instead, Laffey stumped for the Cranston site -- at the corner of Howard Avenue and Route 2 -- and for any other location but Big River. "This location is clearly one of the best locations to put a state police headquarters," Laffey said, sweeping his hand at the golf course behind him. "If not there, I will help the state police put it anywhere -- but not on those 18 acres."

The Republican mayor was joined by House Minority Leader Robert Watson, R-East Greenwich, who urged Governor Carcieri not to eliminate the state's only potential site for a second reservoir. "We have one opportunity to protect our future water source options," he said. Watson and his fellow legislators are key to the governor's plan. The state police will need the General Assembly to grant an exception if they are to build on the reservoir area.

Earlier this week, the Big River site received one key approval, from the state Water Resources Board. The one board member to vote against the plan, William

Stamp III, said yesterday that the Big River plan came up suddenly and seemed to be pushed through with little debate and public scrutiny. "I kind of feel it's a little bit cavalier," Stamp said. "I kind of feel like a powerless minority here. I don't think it's proper. I think it's wrong."

Yesterday, officials from the Rhode Island Audubon Society, Save the Bay, and the Rhode Island Land Trust Council said that if the plan is allowed to proceed, it would endanger the entire Big River property, and other protected lands statewide. "What's to prevent other administrations in the future from using this as a precedent to take whatever land they need?" said Eugenia Marks, director of policy and publications at the Rhode Island Audubon Society. Similarly, what would prevent a municipality from taking protected land for a city building, they asked.

There were also fears that because the Big River land was taken for a specific purpose, a judge could wrest it away from the state if it is determined that it is used for a purpose other than intended. In 2002, voters approved a \$48-million bond issue to build a new state police headquarters. It would replace buildings in Scituate built mostly in the 1930s. This fall, the state focused on land adjoining the John O. Pastore Complex in Cranston as the new site for the station. The state crime laboratories at the University of Rhode Island and the Health Department also would be consolidated into the headquarters building. But the Cranston plan fell out of favor recently for two reasons, according to Bob Brunelle, project manager and associate director for capital projects at the Department of Administration. First is the difficulty in buying the necessary land along Route 2, which is occupied by the Mulligan's Island Mini Golf and Entertainment Complex, owned by Golfing Partners, of Providence. At the 18-acre tract at Howard Avenue and Route 2, the state owns 3 outright, 10 are leased from Golfing Partners from the state and used for a pitch 'n putt golf course, and 5 are owned by Golfing Partners and used as a driveway up to the main Mulligan's Island complex. The state needs to buy out its 10-year lease on the 10 acres, and purchase the 5-acre plot. In the fall, the state put forth an offer on the site. "They [Golfing Partners] countered quite a bit higher," Brunelle said, adding that he could not release any figures because negotiations are technically still open. The state increased its offer, and Golfing Partners came back with a slightly lower price -- but not close enough for the state. Negotiations ground to a halt. "We thought we had gone far enough, and if they could come down further, call us," Brunelle said. Representatives of Golfing Partners could not be reached for comment yesterday.

The other problem had to do with access. The state police want their own entrance to the facility direct from Route 2, rather than entering from Howard Avenue. The Department of Transportation had other ideas, however, and proposed

several other solutions -- none of which satisfied the state police. Several months ago, the Department of Administration began considering other sites. If the Big River plan dies, Brunelle said, the Cranston location will definitely be back on the table.